

compos mentis

What We Are: Our Metaphysical Nature & Moral Implications

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ABSTRACT

An account of our metaphysical nature provides an answer to the question of “what are we?” One such account called Animalism asserts that we are each identical to a biological organism. However, Animalism does not assert that we are animals essentially, but rather our being animals might be only a contingent or temporary feature of us. A different Neo-Aristotelian Hylomorphic view asserts that we are each composites of matter and form, or body and soul, respectively. Although strictly speaking, Hylomorphism seems to be an extended version of Animalism, proponents of Animalism have rejected the compatibility between these two conceptions because they cannot see how someone’s soul can continue to exist without being the form of anything. In this paper, I will argue for the possible persistence of our soul after our death by demonstrating and explaining how the soul can obtain separately from body, and vice versa. In turn, I will show that the persistence of the soul is necessary, but not sufficient for our persistence. By addressing how the soul subsists disembodied, and therefore responding to this concern, I hope to defend that Neo-Aristotelian Hylomorphism is congruous with Animalism. Additionally, I will explore Animalism’s commitment to the claim that each of us was once, and might someday become a non-person (i.e. as a fetus or in a persistent vegetative state). While investigating the influence of this non-person status on our direct moral obligations to fetuses, those in a persistent vegetative state, etc., I will examine how Neo-Aristotelian Hylomorphism may reshape our ethical debates surrounding our moral responsibilities to each other. Finally, I will argue in favour of the Neo-Aristotelian Hylomorphic conception of our metaphysical nature by showing how it better captures our intuitions concerning moral status through the dulling of the extremely sharp distinction between persons and us, which Animalism claims, when we are fetuses or in a persistence vegetative state.

KEYWORDS

Animalism, Hylomorphism, Personal Identity, Metaphysics, Morality, Thomism, Neo-Aristotelian, Soul, Persistence, Moral Status

At a glance, Eric Olson and Neo-Aristotelians such as Aquinas give differing accounts of what constitutes our metaphysical nature. On the one hand, Olson presents an account of animalism, which says that each of us is numerically identical with an animal (Olson 24). However, Olson's animalism does not assert that we are animals essentially, but rather our being animals might be only a contingent or temporary feature of us. Accordingly, animalism does not imply that we have only biological properties, or that we are no different in any important way from other animals (Olson 26). On the other hand, Aquinas develops a version of hylomorphism, which roughly states that each of us is a compound of form and matter, or soul and body, respectively. Strictly speaking then, Aquinas' hylomorphism seems to be an extended version of Animalism when the human *body* is understood to be the human *animal*. Yet, Olson explicitly rejects the compatibility of Thomistic hylomorphism with Animalism because he claims that he cannot see how someone's soul can continue to exist without being the form of anything (Olson 174). So, by addressing how the soul subsists disembodied in this paper, and therefore responding to Olson's concerns, I hope to defend that Thomistic hylomorphism is congruous with Animalism. In turn, I will give considerations for regarding hylomorphism as preferable to Animalism because it better captures our intuitions regarding our moral obligations to each other.

The first view, Animalism implies that we have the metaphysical nature of human animals while denying that each human animal is essentially rational. For Olson specifically, an animal is a material biological organism. An animal for Olson is not an object made up of a material thing and an immaterial thing (Olson 28). For the second view, Aquinas would agree that the organic material comprising our animal is not essentially rational, precisely because it is our souls that are responsible for our rationality. Aquinas describes that each of us is a compound of soul and body, and specifically that we not merely our souls. He argues that it is loosely correct to say that humans are souls only when it is understood that humans are not exclusively souls. He argues that in order for us to be identified exhaustively by our souls, the activity of sensation must belong to the soul alone, so that all activities attributed to us would then be attributable to our souls. However, sensation requires both soul and body and thus, Aquinas claims that we are both soul and body (Dominicans). Therefore, Aquinas thinks it is correct to say "man is said to be composed of soul and body, as a third thing constituted by

two things, neither of which is identical with it. For a man is neither soul nor body" (Klima 233) when we are strictly speaking.

So, both Thomistic hylomorphism and animalism claim that we are identical with a non-rational animal. But, Thomistic hylomorphism says we have an additional aspect that comprises *us*, which is our rational and immaterial soul. Thus, Aquinas' hylomorphism incorporates Olson's Animalism as a constituent part of his account for our metaphysical nature. Yet, Olson objects to this additional concept of the soul by saying, "I cannot see how a thing's substantial form could continue to exist without being the form of anything" (Olson 174). Then he likens the soul subsisting after the corruption of the body to a knot in a rope subsisting after the rope is burned or corrupted. Contrastingly, Aquinas advocates for the soul subsisting after death by discussing how, "the human soul, which we regard as an intellective principle, must of necessity be held to be incorruptible" (Dominicans). And in response to Olson's rope analogy, Aquinas may reply that such an analogy accurately depicts only non-human animal souls, which are nutritive and perceptive, but lack the rationality that is unique to human animal souls.

I will now turn to discuss a possible explanation to Olson's question regarding how souls *continue* to exist disembodied. Working within Aquinas' framework, I will argue for the possible persistence of our soul after our death by demonstrating and explaining how the soul can obtain separately from body. In turn, I will attempt to show that the persistence of the soul is necessary, but not sufficient for our persistence.

We are generated when our soul animates our body, and thus, the soul is the principle by which we have life (Dominicans). This relationship between the soul and the body is a relationship between form and matter, respectively. Of this relationship, we say that matter is the cause of the form insofar as the form exists only in matter. From the perspective of generation and time, matter is prior to form because "that to which something comes is prior to that which comes to it" (Klima 164). For example, a boy, the matter, exists before man, the form, and, in this sense, the boy causes the existence of a man. Likewise, body can be said to obtain prior to and separately from the soul because it is that which the soul must inform.

However, the form is the cause of matter insofar as matter has existence in act only through the form. From the perspective of substance and completeness, the form is prior to matter because matter has complete existence only through the

form (Klima 164). For example, man is prior to a boy in that man is the final cause of the boy. Therefore, soul is the cause of body in that it obtains separately and prior to body in order to actuate it.

From these different perspectives, the priority of either the soul or body indicates a kind of mutual separateness that is necessary in order for one to really cause the other. Since soul can obtain prior to and separately from body, we may acknowledge a real distinction between the soul and the body.

Now, our death is brought about by the process of our animal corrupting through increasing privations, which is an absolute necessity because it cannot be impeded (Klima 164). The 'corpse' designates privations of sensations, growth, and development in the body, as well as the lack of soul. And, these privations hinder or prevent the body's ability to supply the intellect with objects and thus, inhibit the soul's process of intellection. Therefore, it can be said that the soul is dependent on the body insofar as the body is necessary to supply the intellect with its object. Similarly, an animal is dependent on exterior sense-objects insofar that the activity of sensation requires sense-objects. However, this sense of dependence does not entail that the soul or animal is non-subsisting nor that the body or exterior-sense objects is necessary for the persistence of the soul or animal (Dominicans). In death then, despite the hindered intellectual abilities because of its dependence on the body, the immaterial soul can still subsist with hindered abilities.

In order to understand how immaterial souls can subsist without bodies, we can look to explanations of the natures of those immaterial substances that subsist without matter. The fifth chapter of Aquinas' *On Being and Essence* describes a gradient of existence among intellectual substances. The human soul is at the lowest grade among intellectual substances according to Aquinas, and therefore, "among other intellectual substances it has the greatest amount of potentiality, and it is so close to material substances that it attracts a material thing to share its existence" (Klima 241). Intelligences like angels can subsist without matter because of their closer proximity to the first principle, God, who is pure actuality, and therefore requires no matter for existence (Klima 273). The angels still contain potentiality, but their compositional potentiality-to-actuality ratio is low compared to that of rational souls. Thus, souls are unlike angels in that, "it belongs to the very essence of the soul to be united to a body [...] the human soul, remaining in its own existence after separation from the body, has a natural aptitude and

a natural tendency to embodiment” (Dominicans). Although the propensity for union with the body is part of the essence of soul, and the soul can only actually execute powers such as sensation and nutrition when embodied, it still retains these powers virtually when disembodied (Dominicans). So, the soul exists in a dormant or incomplete way when it becomes disembodied, or when we die. The soul persists as a virtual substantial form of the body instead of an actual one, and subsists via its natural proximity to the first principle. The soul as a virtual substantial form becomes an actual substantial form when it actualizes the matter, which is our animal. This actualization is the union of soul and body that generates us, and is therefore necessary for our existence. However, the soul’s subsistence in the virtual state when separated from body is not sufficient for our generation and existence. Instead, our life requires the actualization of our bodies by our souls.

So, the soul obtains independently from the body from the perspective of completeness and perfection. At death, rather than being the actual substantial form of body as when we live, the soul reverts to its being as a virtual substantial form of body. This persistence of soul apart from the body is made possible by the soul’s intellectual nature. This then addresses Olson’s concern about how souls persist after we die. In turn, the soul can finally be accepted as an immaterial addition to the account of Animalism, which is conveniently contained in Aquinas’ Hylomorphic account of what we are.

Now, Olson makes a careful and explicit distinction between giving an account of what we are from giving an account of personhood. Animalism is an account of the former and “implies no answer to the personhood question” (Olson 24). This personhood question involves identifying the required characteristics or qualifications to be considered a person, and what kinds of things possess those necessary characteristics or qualifications. However, an Animalist such as Olson can, and he in fact does commit to the account of personhood where a person is by definition a moral agent that is capable of answering for its actions and thus, possesses mental contents and capacities (Olson 57). This human being, alien, artificial intelligence, or other subject predicated with ‘person,’ in virtue of being a ‘person’ merits a full moral status and is therefore afforded direct moral considerations (i.e. the right to life). For Olson, the human fetus simply becomes a person when it becomes able to think, whereas you come into existence at the same time that the human animal that you are came into existence, or specifically about “sixteen days after fertilization, when the cells that develop into the fetus

become specialized and begin to grow and function in a coordinated manner” (Olson 91).

Differently, a proponent of Thomistic hylomorphism is committed to us increasing in moral status as we develop and actualize our potential rational functions and capacities. For Thomistic hylomorphism there is no sharp divide between personhood and us that is present for Animalism. Instead, there is a gradient of possessing more or less moral status, and so, there is a more constant direct moral obligation to those subjects like fetuses or humans in a persistent vegetative state, which animalism is committed to classifying as non-persons. The gradual acquisition of personhood through the actualization of mental capacities that the hylomorphic view heavily stresses seems preferable to the drastic acquisition of personhood that animalism proposes, precisely because the gradual activation seems consistent with the gradual process of psychological and brain development in human beings. Furthermore, the animalist must non-arbitrarily define what is to be considered an adequate expression of mental content and mental processes by a potential person in order to be considered an actual person. Then, animalists must decide on the methods by which to accurately gage these expressions or behaviours demonstrating mental activity. A worry may arise for the animalist account if we consider the possibility of a potential person having mental activities without the associated behaviours or expressions of them that we tract in those subjects we call actual persons.

The hylomorphic account avoids this difficulty of determining the precise moment at which a fetus or potential person may become a person that the animalist account faces. For the proponents of hylomorphism, as time goes on the fetus is growing in personhood and moral status and therefore our direct moral obligations to these subjects are increasing proportionally. By avoiding a sharp and possibly arbitrarily decided distinction between persons and us that the animalists seem committed to, Thomistic hylomorphism appears more desirable as an account for our metaphysical nature.

Now in summary, I have responded to Olson’s objection that Thomistic hylomorphism is inconsistent with animalism by addressing how our souls may indeed continue to subsist after our death in a disembodied state. In death, our souls continue to be the form of us or of our bodies in an incomplete state. Capacities such as understanding continue in our death, but capacities such as perception temporarily cease. Such momentarily ceased capacities of the soul are conserved

in the subsisting soul awaiting embodiment, in order to bring about activities such as perception once again. The subsisting rational soul obtains in virtue of its closer proximity to pure actuality, and its higher actuality-to-potentiality ratio compared to non-human animal souls. Therefore, I maintain that Thomistic hylomorphism is consistent with animalism. Furthermore, I uphold that this extended version of animalism that is worthy of our consideration because it dulls the sharp distinction between persons and us that Animalism casts, and therefore, better captures our intuitions about our moral obligations to and considerations for one another.

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